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Islam, Western Education and the Riddle of Human Rights

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Relations between Islam and the West have seldom been easy. Enmities and resentments date back centuries. So do cultural contacts, economic ties and periods of relative cooperation.

Today, however, nothing symbolizes that unsteady and often tense relationship more than the events of 11 September, 2001 and the bloodshed that has followed in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the cities of London, Madrid and elsewhere. In this chain of events, fear and violence ignores international borders and spills over into many countries.

The troubles are also implicit in academic analyses and media commentary. The main example is a thesis first fully articulated in 1992 by Samuel P. Huntington. Already a celebrated American political scientist, he made a speech that instantly gained him additional notoriety. In it, he described the development of global conflict in three stages.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he said, struggles were national. Wars were largely threatened or fought among European powers which were seeking control not only over Europe, but over vast colonial empires as well. In the end, Great Britain's temporary position as the leading international power came to a close on the dreadful battlefields of World War I.

In the twentieth century, the principal battles were over ideology, with the main contenders being Nazism, Soviet Communism and Capitalist Democracy. With the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945, the final phase of ideological confrontation was played out over half a century of Cold War—which was not at all “cold,” but in which the main fighting took place among “proxy” powers and internal forces from Greece, Korea and Hungary to Cambodia and Vietnam, with ample examples in Africa and Latin America as well. The mainly bipolar fight between the USSR and the USA ended with the implosion of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the temporarily dominant world power; however, like the “pax Britannica,” uncontested American hegemony was not to last.

Now, in the early twenty-first century, Huntington said, we are witnessing a new set of global fault-lines, which reflect a world divided according to religious and cultural differences. Although he identified a number of potentially serious sources of discord, the one that has won the largest amount of attention pits the West against Islam. It is singled out as the primary contemporary “clash of civilizations,” and

Huntington's speech has been central to the development of the narrative which sustains this perspective. What began as an address to the conservative American Enterprise Institute quickly became an influential article in **Foreign Affairs** (1993), and was soon expanded into a best-selling book (1996).

According to Huntington and his many followers in the fields of diplomacy, military strategy and propaganda, Islam and the West are culturally incompatible; moreover, they can no longer be isolated from each other. Modern communications, transportation and complex economic relations tie the two worlds inextricably together. Geopolitical interests and persistent military hostilities form the focus of their mutual opposition, while deep patterns of licit (oil) and illicit (opium) trade inextricably link them. Their connectedness in the international political economy is too deep for either to extricate itself easily from engagement with the other. Unable or unwilling to leave each other alone, they seem fated to be trading partners, cultural adversaries and, perhaps, enduring adversaries and sometimes violent enemies.

Global rivalries and quarrels have happened before, but this one is said to be different. No longer are struggles in the Near East, the Middle East and elsewhere seen to be only about such things as regional stability, strategic advantage, fossil fuels, democratic governance and market economics. According to Huntington, nothing less might be at stake than the question of which of these supposedly irreconcilable cultures will prevail in a titanic struggle, and which will therefore survive to dominate human societies for generations to come. Only the worst hyperbole of the clash between communism and capitalism sunk quite to this level of mutual mistrust and disrespect, and even then the diplomatic community was seldom as divided as the current leadership in the West seems to be from the "terrorists" and their enablers.

As a result, Huntington's thesis is still being used for rhetorical purposes to explain and justify American-led initiatives in (so far) Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan under the guise of the "war on terror." It is also implicitly held by various "jihadists," who are dedicated to confronting American power, ridding their lands of the "great Satan" and, in extreme cases, expanding their activities into Europe and North America, some with the dream or delusion of world-wide conquest.

From the Clash of Civilizations to Cultural Concerns

The attitudes and actions of both sides have important consequences for citizens not only in Islamic countries but also in the West. They present especially serious trials for educators, both in principle and in practice. For other citizens, the purported clash of civilizations brings up questions concerning the very Western values that are said to be in jeopardy. For educators, these questions intrude into schools and classrooms from kindergarten to postgraduate

schools. People in the West are compelled to think seriously about the values that their civilization is said to embody, and teachers are forced to face difficult dilemmas about how best to handle issues of cultural sensitivity in the classroom and curricula.

At issue are the two sides of the coinage of cultural tension. On the one hand, the sociological reality of pluralism and multiculturalism is altering the character of European and North American societies that once maintained reasonably uniform domestic cultures or at least assimilated manageable waves of immigration with only occasional violence, resentment and intolerance. On the other hand, the perceived threat to viable national traditions is putting respect for difference and for the rights of individuals and groups at risk.

In the first place, in addition to involvement in armed combat as much as half a world away, Western societies are experiencing what is said to be an unprecedented measure of demographic change in what is already a significant era of geographical mobility. People all over the world are on the move—some by choice and some by coercion. Environmental, political and economic pressures are pushing people from rural areas and pulling them into the cities of Asia, Africa and Latin America. From the cities, many seek opportunities to escape poverty or to find safety from tyrannical regimes and armed conflict by moving from country to country, region to region and continent to continent. Economic migrants and potential refugees have already changed the composition of populations in Europe where, according to *Muslim Population Worldwide (2009)*, the total Muslim population is now 7%, and noticeable increases are especially apparent in France and Germany. Resulting skirmishes have taken place over living and working conditions, attempts to restrict the influence of Muslim dress and religious worship and perceived insults to Islam, all of which combine to make mutual accommodation increasingly difficult.

In the second place, national security initiatives have massively increased open surveillance in addition to hidden data collection and domestic intelligence operations that many consider not merely intrusive, but also violations of hard-won and long-standing civil liberties. As a result, serious disputes about the compatibility of religious freedom with other rights and liberties have arisen. These disputes are not abstract and theoretical, and one of the most visible debates over human rights concerns the status of women both in Islam and in the larger world.

This article is intended to describe some of the background to the riddle of human rights as it affects Islam and the West, and to open the discussion of political principles to a consideration of the concrete, day-to-day activities of teachers, students and educational institutions. It is our purpose to present at least a skeletal framework for discussion of the philosophical, political and pragmatic issues specifically related to the subject of women in the Muslim states and to Muslim women in the Islamic diaspora, and to connect these topics

in a way that will encourage a useful consideration of the ethical, political and pedagogical dilemmas posed by the apparent disjunction and discord among women's rights, cultural tolerance and religious freedom.

Ideology and Conflict

The status of women in Islam is a complex, culturally diverse and almost always misunderstood topic. For many in the West, Islam appears to be a repressive religious tradition that compels women to live under harsh rules, to be deprived of opportunities for education, employment and personal development. Severe punishments seem to be meted out to women exercising the simplest of human freedoms. Often the focus of attention is on various forms of traditional dress from the full-body covering to the simple head scarf in the great debate over the wearing of the burqa, the niqab and the hijab. More ominously, headline-grabbing incidents of so-called "honour killings" in which women accused of mainly sexual transgressions have been put to death by their own intimate male relatives offend what most Westerners regard as a minimal standard of human decency. Underlying it all are limitations of various degrees of severity on matters such as education, employment and the right to participate fully and independently in civil society.

If it is to be of practical use, the consideration of human rights, and particularly of women's rights, must take place in a historical context. Outrage at apparent inhumanity and injustice, it should be remembered, cuts both ways, and it requires no relativistic abandonment of ethical and moral principles to appreciate that what one society views an intolerable oppression can be seen in another as the simple observance of traditional religious belief—in the most obvious case, the injunction to dress modestly and perform appropriate social roles. Moreover, before Westerners display excessive arrogance in their moral condemnation of the restraints placed upon women's rights in Islamic societies, it should be recalled that legal restrictions on women's opportunities and ambitions were removed only a comparatively short time ago in the West and that the right of a woman to vote, to own property and to enroll in a medical or a law school was, in most cases, established less than a century ago. Moreover, one need not be a radical feminist to observe that informal constraints, misogyny and violence against women are far from absent even in the most "progressive" Western countries. Our point is, at the outset, that it is wise to refrain from making premature judgements about religion and human rights, and it is important to consider that many controversies are more complicated than they at first appear.

In order to penetrate beneath surface observations and impressions, we offer the general proposition that, as a matter of historical record, close and especially unprecedented contact among groups with evident differences in language, customs and traditions can lead to collisions. Moreover, when these differences involve

plainly significant and apparently antithetical beliefs and behaviours, the prospects for open hostilities rise dramatically. What therefore appear as irresolvable disputes between Muslim principles and practices and those in the West should not immediately be defined as unique patterns of hostility. Similar conflicts have separated clans, tribes, nations and civilizations since time immemorial. So, Huntington's clash is nothing new, but merely more conspicuous today.

Examples of cultural conflict in the distant and recent past are plentiful. The religious wars between Roman Catholics and Protestants left parts of Europe bloodied and in ruins for centuries after the Reformation and have continued today in places such as Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia. Nationalist wars in Europe and elsewhere brought death to millions as Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Russia and Germany sought colonial empires and, when not engaged overseas, took it upon themselves to leave their homelands and those of their neighbours in blood-soaked disarray as the dead were buried and borders moved this way and that. Few of the earlier conflicts, however, came close to the slaughter in World War II in which, in defence of (or in opposition to bizarre) theories of politics and race, millions of soldiers and civilians were killed in fierce hand-to-hand combat, vaporized in indiscriminate high-tech bombing raids, and put to hideous death in extermination camps. Leaving aside analyses that attribute such conflagrations to underlying economic factors, it cannot be denied that sincere and deep commitment to one set of ideas or another played a prominent role in modern almost apocalyptic warfare.

This brief account sets the stage for the problem to be addressed here: how may world leaders and ordinary citizens alike think about conflict in a way that will ensure that we do not repeat the brutality of the past, now made much more fearsome because of the incredible weapons of mass destruction now available to nation-states and soon, perhaps, to terrorist groups? Not the principle but the scale of destruction now possible is the main cause of the urgency of innovative thinking about conflict management. Currently available weapons make the containment of conflict a matter of necessity. As Albert Einstein replied, when asked what weapons would be used in the next World War, he replied: "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones."

The Western Doctrine of Human Rights

Among many Western advocates of human rights, a strong and growing body of literature exists to explain the basis, describe the parameters and ensure support for the fundamental equality of all people, irrespective of any particular characteristics—inherent or acquired—that distinguish one person from another (Ismay, 1997). Both freedom from external interference in personal choices and

activities (the so-called “negative” freedoms of speech, of the press, of religion, of association, etc.) and freedom to maximize individual potential (the “positive” rights to thrive with adequate food, housing, medical care, access to education and to employment) have been gradually advanced, theoretically accepted at least as goals, and set down in both national and international constitutions, accords, agreements, treaties and proclamations by organizations such as the United Nations.

Human rights advocates and experts have been able to trace the threads of contemporary and mainly Western notions of personal, social, political and economic rights and freedoms back to the earliest historical documents. The roots of contemporary beliefs about liberty, equality and the rule of law have been articulated in the sacred texts and religious traditions of Buddhism, of Christianity and, indeed, of Islam. Precursors to contemporary concepts of universal human rights are present in the political theories of ancient Greece and Rome. Though often overshadowed by political tyranny and ideological authoritarianism, these ideas and ideals of human rights and freedoms endured and evolved. Then, when loosely combined with commitments to science, reason, democracy and market economies, and came to constitute what is now known as the Enlightenment in Western history. Human rights, as widely understood today, had early practical formulations in the philosophical works of such social contract theorists as Hobbes and Locke. They were expressed in the bold language of the U.S. **Declaration of Independence** (1776), the constitution of revolutionary France (1789) and, more recently, in the United Nations’ **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (1948). Thus, a gradual aggregation of “self-evident” truths about innate human rights and an equally gradual extension of the claim to these freedoms by women resulted, in the twentieth century, in such measures as the extension of the democratic franchise and, in recent decades, in steps toward social equality, reproductive rights and reforms various aspects of employment and family law. Intimately tied to the tradition of progressive change that was first heralded in the eighteenth century, the inventory of human rights came largely to be accepted and codified in law and in custom in the West by the end of the twentieth (Ishay, 2004, pp. 64-75).

The fundamental commitment was made to the principles that human rights were universal, incontrovertible and applicable to everyone regardless of race, colour, creed, age, religion, national origin, gender and, more recently, gender orientation. To the modern Western mind, nothing could be more obvious than the idea that the existing and expanding list of human rights would deepen in the modern liberal democracies and eventually extend to all the countries of the Earth. In addition, as signatories to the pertinent United Nations agreements, Muslim countries seemed to agree to these essential tenets of what Westerners assume to be the foundation for social, economic and political progress and to civilized relations among peoples and among countries. That anyone would find fault with any of the foregoing strikes people in the West as being certainly

“backward,” quite possibly “barbaric,” morally wrong or simply perverse. As usual, however, the problem is more complex.

Illusions about Islam

People in the West, however, are especially cautious about Islam. It seems to them that the biggest obstacles to the triumph of Enlightenment values are no longer to be found among pre-modern tribal and traditional societies which lack the social organization and technology to modernize. Rather, they fear that it is not merely insular and inflexible traditionalism or simple lack of knowledge that must be overcome, but rather the outright and intense opposition to Western culture to be found in places where the authorities or, worse, “rogue” elements have access to sophisticated communications technology and to the much-feared “weapons of mass destruction.”

Unfortunately, a great deal of Western thinking about the purportedly hostile ideology of Islam is distorted by a profound ignorance of the “other.” Westerners are justified in believing that the image of the West promoted by “Islamist extremists” is distorted, but Western views of Islam can be equally deformed by fabrication and misunderstanding in the opposite direction. Perhaps the most troublesome of the many myths about Islam is that the religion constitutes a vast monolithic structure of beliefs, all of which are in some way directed toward an aggressive and expansionist view that encourages Muslims to crave world domination. The same, of course, could be said about Christians who, from the Crusades to contemporary missions, held out the dream of converting humanity to its supposedly one true faith; but, acknowledging the universal Christian goal of converting non-believers does little to dissuade Western peoples from thinking that there is something uniquely dangerous about the Muslim religion as a whole.

The fact is, however, that Islam is not so different from Christianity or even Judaism insofar as it constitutes a broad religious tradition with many sects within it (never mind that the God of all three—whether called YHWH, Jehovah or Allah—is ultimately the same. Within each of these related traditions, there are stark differences on matters of faith, doctrine and proper forms of worship, but it can sensibly be argued that those differences are not much greater than differences within the religion, and that those internal differences are also related to important cultural variations and national histories. Among Christians, for example, it is possible to find members of the Russian Orthodox, the Irish Catholic and the American Pentecostal churches; among Muslims, there are Saudi Arabian Wahabis and Sufi mystics, as well as the majority Sunnis and the minority Shi'ites.

In terms of the diverse beliefs and interpretation of the sacred texts, there is much truth in the observation that it is not Islam itself that dictates what many see to be the oppression of women. Indeed, some argue forcefully that nothing in the **Qur'an** justifies the attitudes

toward women that are expressed by the Taliban in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Indeed, there is a strong and growing movement of Muslim feminists such as Irshad Manji who are regularly declared to be heretics and apostates by their rivals, but who are also leading figures in the drive for a progressive and secularized Islam. While a direct historical parallel is difficult to draw, it is plain that divisions over belief and behaviour are at least influenced by the cultural setting of the believer. So, just as the history of Europe is replete with instances of troubles among Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians and just as the West has been the scene of innumerable confrontations within even those subdivisions of the faith, so too have Muslims fought one another to the death, ostensibly over points of theology that might seem inconsequential to those without the historical knowledge or sensibilities to appreciate their importance to the faithful and the heretics in their turn. Whether the influence of globalization, urbanization, technological innovation and an increased commitment to science (not forgetting that during the West's "middle ages" Islamic countries were the centre of scholarship, scientific and technological development) will lead to both modernization and secularism is indeterminate; however, it is not impossible to think about Islam, Christianity and Judaism as evolving religious traditions which will both influence and be influenced by trends in technology and political economy with significant changes and trends emerging, sometimes with little foreknowledge.

If it can be said that Islam is diverse and changing, then it follows that attitudes toward human rights in general and women's rights in particular are not static. Even now, there are few points upon which all Muslims are agreed, and the question of women's rights is one upon which there is consensus.

One example of what is commonly called a "conservative" position attempts to answer the question: "Why, if Islam really regards the woman's humanity on an equal basis of that of the man, does it give the man privilege over the female in some dealings such as legal testimony, inheritance, blood money, charge of the family, heading the states and other supporting ministrations?" The answer provided is that Allah considers only the piety and righteousness of the person, favouring those who "abstain from all kinds of sins and evil deeds" and "perform all kinds of good deeds, which He has ordained." Thus, all are equal and any "distinctions ... [are] merely conditioned by the different tasks assigned to each of the two sexes by virtue of the natural disposition (Al Qaradawy, 2002)." To Westerners, this argument is unpersuasive and will, perhaps, conjure up thoughts of claims that, until 1954, America's racially segregated schools were officially considered "separate but equal"; or, more to the point, that similar arguments were advanced in opposition to women's suffrage well into the twentieth century. There is no doubt that such positions remain widely held, but it must also be understood that there are countercurrents within Islam.

The fact of diversity within Islam is complicated by tremendous

pressure to change and to adapt to the centrifugal forces of globalization. Even a cursory review of religious and social attitudes across the Islamic world will reveal a great range of opinion and a great variety of formal and informal regulation. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are forbidden to drive automobiles while, at the same time, the producers of the Hollywood film, "Sex and the City 2" shot their movie in Morocco without incident.

The diversity of attitudes is, itself, unstable. There is much evidence of intimations and illustrations of change. As Rebecca Barlow writes, Islam exists within a "non-static, dynamic framework that remains under constant expropriation and development from all regions of the globe" (2009, p. 48). Although the more assertive critics insist that "Arab countries severely curtail the political rights of their citizens, men and women," and that "even when recognized on paper, they are rarely respected in practice" (Ottaway, 2004)," there are plenty of reports from throughout the Islamic world of what Westerners would call "progress" (Barron, 2007; Ghitis, 2009; Kelly, nd; Taboh, 2009). The path of progress is sometimes slow, inconsistent and sometimes barely detectable (Bard, 2009, Novial, 2003). Indeed, in some places, the trend seems to be in the opposite direction as traditional authority reasserts itself in the wake of change. There are, for example, repeated reminders of tacit consent for killing women discovered in an act of adultery, grisly corporal punishments for sexual indiscretions and the like with at least 5,000 "honour killings" taking place every year, including 1,000 in Pakistan alone (United Nations Population Fund, 2000). Combined with news of increasingly energetic women's rights advocacy and organization throughout Islam and it becomes clear that a single-minded view of Islam is inappropriate.

For our purposes, it is enough to conclude that from Morocco to Indonesia, there is far more ideological heterogeneity than many people in the West believe. Indeed, as Edward W. Said (2002, p. 70) has insisted: "on intellectual and historical grounds, Islam is not properly a subject at all but (at best) a series of interpretations that are so divergent in nearly every case as to make a mockery of the enterprise conceived of by the interpreter as one monolithic whole called 'Islam'."

What the future may hold is uncertain. No doubt, Western optimists are of the opinion that, whatever the current constraints, what they believe to be the benefits of progress arising from the Enlightenment and the universal doctrine of human rights are inevitable. Though the path may be difficult, it is more difficult to dissuade them from their modernist project. Their position is supported by the emergence of genuine feminist agitation in Islam. Some may be surprised to learn that Qasim Amin published a book entitled **The Liberation of Women** (1899) in Egypt over a century ago, and that women's emancipation movements have been growing since at least the 1930s (Darraj, 2002; Mitra, 2006); they may not, of course, be surprised to discover that the resistance to the exotic

notions of women's equality have also been vigorously repressed.

Rights in Contrast; Rights in Contradiction

The internal religious and cultural conflicts within Islam are of interest to anyone who shares a belief in universal human rights, or is united in opposition to them. The progress or retardation of women's movements in developing nations and particularly in Islamic countries is a critical matter. It is also one that spreads out far beyond Africa and Asia to the Islamic diaspora and to the Western countries whose demographic profiles demonstrate the degree to which the allegedly clashing cultures are coming into contact in workplaces, neighbourhoods and schools from Toronto to Paris and from Copenhagen to New York City.

As this process works itself out, crucial tests of Western values are taking place, not as they are spreading to Muslim countries in what some people regard as yet a further display of European colonialism and American imperialism, but as they become vital measures of the solidity of those values in the countries that gave rise to them.

Freedom of religion, for example, is regarded as an essential right in liberal democracies. It was born of a desire by freethinkers and dissenters to live lives free from the established church, whether it was Anglican, Roman Catholic or any other. It is unclear, however, that the framers of the **Constitution of the United States** or the much more recent **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms** had in mind anything more striking than the unacceptable domination of one Christian sect by another. Nonetheless, once established in the fundamental law, the concept of religious freedom was fit for contests over the interpretation of its depth and breadth. In recent decades the applicability of the extent of religious freedom has been clarified somewhat. The United States Supreme Court, for instance, has ruled on a number of cases in which religious expression has run afoul of other statutes. In the case of the **Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah** 508 U.S. 520 (1993), the right of a church in the Santeria tradition (commonly, if inaccurately known as Voo Doo) to sacrifice live chickens at its worship services was upheld, despite a city by-law forbidding cruelty to animals. In the alternative, in **Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith**, 494 U.S. (1990), the constitutional protection of religious freedom was denied to aboriginal people who used the illegal drug peyote as a traditional part of their spiritual observances. This may be a "clash of cultures" on a comparatively small level, but such instances illustrate that conflicting rights are not only controversial but the subject of serious judicial decision making. Nonetheless, these cases are often considered marginal and not deemed major affronts to the culture of the United States. Indeed, they were regarded (if they were noticed at all) as curiosities and minor footnotes in constitutional law. More recent instances having mainly to do with the religious

freedom of women to wear apparel from head-scarves to full body covering have arisen, with the controversy in France over the legal banning of the burqa in public buildings being, perhaps, the most widely known case (CBC News, 2009).

Today, no such lassitude exists. Decisions of the courts and of legislatures matter a great deal and politicians and the public alike are aware of it. With the arrival of significant numbers of Muslims from various parts of the world, and in light of the announcement of the War on Terror, the Clash of Civilizations and other incitements to intolerance, things have mightily changed. There has been heightened anxiety over the perceived threats to civil liberties supposedly posed by Muslim immigrants whose “modesty” requires women to cover various proportions of their bodies depending on their religious beliefs. There have also been far more serious threats to free speech and to life itself by ardent Muslims who are outraged when Western authors, journalists and newspaper cartoonists are seen to have insulted the Muslim faith. And, of course, there is much consternation when Muslim communities advocate the introduction of Sharia Law into countries that have been settled mainly with Common Law or the Civil Code for centuries. These occasional flashpoints betoken a situation in which something substantial may be taking place. Enduring debates about multiculturalism and familiar concerns about assimilation can be managed. Cases of occupational or social discrimination against minorities can be resolved. Currently, however, an atmosphere has been created in which relations between established cultures and immigrants threaten to call forth nativistic bigotry and obsessive xenophobia in all their most distressing forms.

In such an atmosphere, it does little immediate good to draw attention to past injuries perpetrated against newcomers, to remind ourselves of the ethnic and religious atrocities of the past centuries or the legacy of slavery in the very liberal democracies that currently feel their liberal culture to be at risk. Instead, it is important to consider the collective heritage of the West with a view toward understanding better the origins of ideals of liberty and appreciate more accurately how they came into being. Part of this achievement of historical understanding involves acknowledging the past and recognizing that the pathology of prejudice and the evils of extremism are plentiful and that they are not limited to any one civilization; however, the critical part is for Westerners to recall how their political beliefs in individual liberty and human rights came about, how stubbornly they were resisted by the authorities of the day and how recently they have become symbolically definitive of an entire way of modern life. This process of recollection should accomplish at least three objectives:

- It should remind citizens in the West of how recently their ancestors lived under regimes that bear strong resemblances to the ones which some opportunistic Western leaders now claim “hate our freedoms”;
- It should acquaint advocates of liberal democracy with the idea that their political culture and institutions are the

cumulative effect of centuries of social and economic evolution and that, despite their achievements, might be more fragile than many people believe;

- It should provoke thought about how political cultures have evolved in the past and have developed into what people in the West call the higher stages of social development, political maturity and seemingly endless economic and technological progress.

Serious thought about such matters might quickly dispel at least some of the apparent arrogance which people in the West display toward others. It might encourage a more realistic assessment of how to react constructively to processes of change within and without the boundaries of Western societies. And, it might also revitalize a spirit of openness that could be the most effective protection against the worst consequences of the “clash of civilizations,”—namely, the abandonment of civil liberties out of fear that others will destroy them and, ironically, the possibility that those liberties may be at most risk from those who most earnestly seek to defend them.

These concerns exist as proper subjects for discussion at the local, national, regional and global levels. As educators, however, the readers of this journal are also aware of how these issues insinuate themselves into the classroom, the curriculum and the institutions of higher education. They pose serious dilemmas for students, teachers and senior administrators alike.

As citizens, it is important for all of us to acquaint ourselves with the world around us in order to make informed choices about matters of public policy. Overheated rhetoric and devastating actions on all sides frame in which the “clash of civilizations” is currently contained. This requires each of us to look deeply at the facts that are evident and the values we truly wish to articulate lest we get swept up in ill-considered responses to daily events.

As educators, the process of searching beneath the easy interpretations and thoughtless reactions is nothing less than a core professional responsibility. It alone makes it possible to deal with unavoidable challenges in a clear and principled manner. Members of the academic community are expected to embody the considered standards of civic responsibility and the principles our colleges and universities were designed to uphold. This responsibility, however, is not as straightforward as it might seem. It would be both impertinent and presumptuous of us to lecture professional educators about the best ways to display civic virtue and to live up to their vocational ideals; however, we trust that it will not seem disrespectful to raise a few points for reflection.

First, in recent years Western democracies have not been utterly insensitive to the needs of migrants, cultural minorities and marginal communities as the realities of social diversity become relevant to the maintenance of social harmony and stability. Accordingly, most

Western societies and the educational institutions within them acknowledge the rights of employers, employees and students to work and thrive in an institutional setting that is free from racial, ethnic, religious and gender discrimination and harassment. What remains to be determined is precisely what counts as either discrimination or harassment and, for the purposes of this article, what balance among religious freedom, gender equity and academic freedom can best be defended. Obviously, open prejudice and hostile behaviour bordering upon if not transgressing the boundaries of criminality are to be condemned; however, if postsecondary education is to be what liberal societies claim it to be—namely a place in which contrary ideas can be openly expressed and debated in the vigorous search for truth—are there new limits to be placed on academic freedom in the name of what is often derogatorily labeled “political correctness”? And, if cultural sensitivities prevail over academic freedom, will Western postsecondary institutions be able to offer an academic curriculum that is worthy of the name?

Second, although much is said and done to make the claim that higher education should be free from the imposition of either personal opinion or political ideology, and that they should instead be devoted to the dissemination of knowledge in a fair and objective manner, everyone knows (or should know) that this is an unachievable ideal and one which may not truly be in the interest of teachers and students alike. We do not have to be postmodern relativists to understand that every school, every curriculum and every classroom is home to certain organizational and intellectual principles that are usually followed implicitly, even if they are not stated explicitly. Especially in the social sciences and humanities but also in vocational studies certain presumptions are made about what counts as knowledge, what topics are worthy of exploration, what standards of evidence and logic are required. So, many schools are openly engaged in catering to the labour market needs of business and industry, while some schools (or programs within schools such as “Women’s Studies”) are frankly critical of existing social arrangements. In such situations, what some describe as their mandate can be interpreted by others as their ideology. How are such issues to be resolved?

Finally, in addition to admonitions to be fair, sensitive and respectful of others, increased attention to the cultural backgrounds of students and teachers has led many institutions and the governments or private boards to whom they are responsible to outline codes of conduct for the optimization of the teaching and learning process. As a result, since it is not uncommon for discussion of controversial topics to result in hurt feelings, perceived insults and alleged attacks on identity and belief systems, what is to be done to resolve the inherent conflicts? A few examples should make the point.

How is a college to deal with proposed or existing courses and departments that inquire into cultural or religious communities, histories and traditions? Is there merit in Islamic Studies or Women’s

Studies or programs explicitly advocating Human Rights? What, if any, limits should be placed on courses in comparative religion? Do students who enroll in such courses or programs have the right to object to the content? Would, for instance, a Muslim student in a Women's Studies course have a reasonable complaint if the teacher graphically described what is sometimes called "female circumcision" and defined it as "mutilation"? Where, if anywhere, is a line to be drawn between critical thinking and the perception of disrespect to deeply and sincerely held items of "faith"? What is an appropriate reaction when courses in political science or international business assess the global political economy in a way that may be critical of Islamic countries on the one hand and imperial powers on the other? After all, when cross-cultural relations are being addressed in the context of ongoing conflict, it is hard to imagine a situation in which some comment or even some research assignment would not offend the especially sensitive on one side or the other.

How, indeed, is a college to handle a complaint against a biology teacher by either "fundamentalist" Muslims or "fundamentalist Christians" whose faith insists on "creationism" or "intelligent design" or, for that matter, an anthropology professor whose account of sexual differences leads to the conclusion that the role of women in society is not "natural," but socially constructed and maintained in the interest of patriarchy.

None of these examples are hypothetical. They have all arisen in actual college environments, and have played out through various administrative processes in ways that readers might find surprising and discomforting.

The answers to these conundrums and others easily imagined are not simple. Whether dealing with the internal tensions in Islam—in Africa and Asia or in the diaspora—or dealing with appropriate Western responses, it is important to recognize that, although human rights are relatively easy to list, they are inherently controversial both generally and specifically. Moreover, as Kate Nash has pointed out, there is no uncontested inventory of rights upon which everyone agrees and which can be drawn up and turned over to a government for disinterested implementation. The controversy over the meaning of the Second Amendment to the **Constitution of the United States** and whether the "right to bear arms" is a promise to all individual citizens or just to the "well ordered militia" in each state is just one obvious instance of the kind of ambiguity that is evident in the definition of any particular right or freedom.

So, Nash has suggested that a good beginning would be to appreciate that a successful strategy for promoting human rights begins with the understanding that rights are not Platonic forms, eternal, immutable and transcendental. They are human constructions, intensely experienced but endlessly negotiable and endlessly evolving. They are not, she says, "simply administered through state procedures, as if they already always existed as clear

and distinct aims” (2009, pp. 8-9). At the same time, she agrees, “it is only through states that human rights can be realized” (2009, p. 2)

The result of this recognition is that if human rights and women’s rights are to be expanded, and if appropriate respect is to be given to religious freedom in the process, the debate must be removed from the hands of religious, governmental and military authorities alone. At some point and in some fashion, the rigidity of ideology must begin to accommodate competing views and interests. This is not satisfying either to those who wish to privilege religious doctrine over particular rights or to those who wish to sweep aside all religious constraints upon personal freedoms.

It may not even please those who believe that the relative preference for freedom of religion or gender equity are merely the by-products of patterns of large socio-economic and technological forces, and who expect the overarching process of globalization to result in an emerging set of values and practices tied to the needs of the vast technological mode of production that seems to be growing among us. How long, they wonder, can profound differences in belief withstand the homogenizing influences of modern economic and technological change? How long will political ideologies and religious faiths hold up against the material juggernaut of the digital age, worldwide systems of production, distribution and finance? How long will it be until postmodernity compels the jettisoning of local customs and languages or, at least, their transformation from being core components of personal identities to recreational pastimes?

It will be, we suspect, quite long enough, for there is little evidence that currently “clashing” cultures are apt to disappear quickly. Recent struggles for ethnic and national independence in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union show that the politics of identity remain potent and the issues in play have strong centripetal implications, creating powerful movements away from a potential core of common values. So, while hegemonic cultural practices from the Internet and E-mail to integrated global commodity and money markets may one day bring about uniformities in both symbolic and material culture, and while multinational enterprises, interconnected research institutions, multilateral trade, universalizing information technology, consumer products and popular culture seem to exert pressures that will eventually render national and ideological differences obsolete, that time is not yet, and may never be. Eventually, acceptance of gay marriage and rejection of “honour killings” may, at least from the Western human rights perspective, constitute a measure of human progress. After all, it is now possible to buy McDonalds hamburgers in Moscow, stay at a Holiday Inn in Lesotho and enjoy a Las Vegas lifestyle in Dubai. Which of the competing trends toward convergence and divergence will prevail, and whether technology and political economy will overcome ideology are themes that must be kept in mind throughout.

In the meantime, small markers of change cannot be denied. Increased female participation in the labour market in Islamic countries is said to be building a sense of independence and self-confidence among women (Pais, 2006). Transitions from domestic work to wage-labour is subtly altering domestic relations in parts of the Muslim world (Bacchus, 2006). And, of course, intergenerational change among Muslim families in Western countries is apt to lead to further secularization (Sökefeld, 2008). The changes, however, are not preordained. They are not part of a predestined logocentric universe, moving inexorably, as Hegel might have it, toward an idealized rational fulfillment of a particular dream. And, most assuredly, they will be altered for the better by excessive stridency on any side. The need for civility remains, and for Western educators that requires open-mindedness without the abandonment of informed, critical educational policies and practices. The pressures to yield to narrow visions of education on the one hand or to sanitize teaching and learning so as to offend no one and risk teaching nothing of real-life importance are strong. Good sense and perhaps a measure of courage are in demand and must not be seen to be in short supply.

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